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ABSTRACT

Puerto Rico, although Hispanic, Roman Catholic, and conservative about women's role, has one of the highest divorce rates in the world. Puerto Rico's divorce rate has increased substantially since the process of industrialization began. This study analyzed 300 Puerto Rican women divorced between July 1980 and May 1981. Findings indicate that they are young, have completed more years of education than their ex-husbands, and have surpassed the mean educational attainment for the general population. Of the women, 65.5 percent lived in urban areas, 73 percent were heads of households, and 80 percent had from one to three children. The fact that 51% of these women are participating in the labor force and that they occupy higher positions in the work structure than their ex-husbands contradicts the findings of earlier studies. A higher educational and employment status appears to be associated with better psychological well-being. High levels of home stress, job stress, and role overload seem to be associated with lower levels of psychological well-being in the women. By contrast, the greater the income satisfaction reported by the divorced woman, the more enhanced her psychological well-being. Despite the stresses and changes that divorce entails, 75 percent of the women said that they would repeat the experience if the circumstances were repeated. Data are presented on six tables and figures. An 11-item list of references is included. (BJV)

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THE WELL-BEING OF RECENTLY DIVORCED PUERTO RICAN WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Puerto Rico, although Hispanic, Roman Catholic, and conservative in terms of women's roles, has one of the highest divorce rates in the world. Unlike other Hispanic women, Puerto Rican women in the United States are similar to black women in their relative high rate of divorce (1). For the period from 1965 to 1980, Puerto Rico competed with United States for first place in divorce rate per 1,000 population among a number of selected countries (Figure 1).

Similar to the mainland, in Puerto Rico divorce rate has shown a tendency to increase since the early 40's (Table 1). Worth noting in Table 1 is the drastic increase in the divorce rate from the 70's to the 80's, a tendency similar to that of the United States: 1970 32.8%; 1980 46.1%.

During the last forty years, Puerto Rico has undergone a rapid process of industrial and economic change. The Island has been transformed from a mainly agrarian rural society to a highly industrialized and urbanized social system. Industrialization and urbanism have increased educational and work opportunities, personal income, life expectancy and other health and economic indicators. As expected, the participation of women in the educational and work structures has greatly increased during this process of development (2). The number of households headed by women, as a consequence of marital disruption, has also increased rapidly. Puerto Rico has one of the highest divorce rates in the world. Recent projections indicate that nearly half of recent marriages will terminate in divorce (3).

Most of the early Puerto Rican survey literature available depicts Puerto Rican married women in a very dependent role--unhappy and guilty when not subordinated to the husband. However, the most recent studies in the general Puerto Rican literature tells a different story (4). According to Colon, young Puerto Rican women are assertive and unwilling to accept the double standard of the traditional Puerto Rican culture. Furthermore, economic and social conditions on the Island have changed dramatically since most of these early studies were done. Women are taking advantage of the increased educational opportunities and seem to have assimilated the high value placed on education in Puerto Rico. Efforts to protect women's rights and work positions have been organized somewhat. Therefore, the results from the above cited early studies may or may not be applicable to the situation of today's married women, and certainly less to today's large number of divorced women in Puerto Rico. The analysis reported in this document aims to understand the factors associated with the well-being of recently divorced Puerto Rican women.

It is a well proven fact that transition from marriage to singleness is a stressful event which entails a variety of circumstances that might impact the women's psychological well-being at various levels (5-6). Social networks established during marriage are weakened and established interactions with these networks frequently terminate. Also, new roles have to be learned by the women. With no father in the house, the divorce women have to assume the role of

head of the household and breadwinner. Furthermore, in Puerto Rico, divorced women have the difficult task of accommodating to the new position of divorce with all the prejudice it entails in a traditional hispanic society.

Thus, the theoretical orientation that guide this analysis assumes that divorce involves many structural changes that might be stressors for the women. We further assume that these stressors, which in this paper are conceptualized as house stress, role overload, occupational stress, and income satisfaction, are related to the women's psychological well-being.

METHODS

Sampling

The sampled population of the study comprises Puerto Rican women divorced between July 1980 and May 1981. A stratified random sample of 300 women was drawn from 12 courtrooms located throughout the Island in proportion to the number of divorces granted at each courtroom.

Procedures described by Turk and Smith (7) were used to ensure replacements for cases drawn that did not meet the following criteria: 1) complete residential address; 2) divorced only once; 3) born in Puerto Rico; and 4) that the time elapsed between the divorce proceedings and the interviewing could not be more than 2 years.

Measures

The primary variables considered in this paper include psychological well-being, occupational stress, house stress, income satisfaction and role-overload. They are briefly described.

Psychological Well-Being: This concept was measured with Dupuy's General Well Being scale (GWB) which has been validated for the Puerto Rican population (8). The GWB uses a Likert-type scale, comprising 15 items with six response alternatives. The items in the scale seek information about the respondent's freedom from health concerns, energy level, degree of satisfaction with life, mood, and emotional and behavioral control. Fifty-one percent of the divorced women reported high general well-being and 48.80% report medium or low well-being.

Stress: Stress is defined as discomfort in an individual which can either be manifested through the expression of dissatisfaction or through the presence of psychosomatic symptomatology, or both. In other words, stress is evidenced phenomenally in the person by discomfort, dissatisfaction or malfunction. This definition led us to the construction of the different indices for stress.

The occupational stress index was developed using items from several other scales that apparently measure the same construct with high reliability and validity (9). Our indicators of job related stress are based on the stress generated by the incompatibility between the job demands and the individual's resources for meeting these demands, the conflict and ambiguity of the job, and the work-overload required by this position. This index is composed of nine items which includes questions regarding the frequency that the respondent has considerable responsibility over her work and that of others; makes costly decisions; is overloaded at work and has to

comply with tasks that go against her will. The more frequent the respondent has that stress, the higher the score. This scale had an alpha of .77. Almost one fifth of the sample (19.2%) were found to be viewed as having low job stress whereas half (51.3%) perceived themselves as having medium job stress. Thirty percent of our respondents described themselves as having high job stress.

Another measure of stress included in the analysis is house stress. House stress represents a measure of how stressful is the home environment due to the household chores, responsibilities, physical work and family demands that it may entail. The index of house stress is the composite score on seven items which were used to identify strains divorced women might experience in their roles as homemakers. This scale attained an alpha coefficient of .84. The low house stress group comprised 64% of the sample, the medium stress 25%, and the high stress group 11%.

Role-overload is the measure that intends to identify the strains associated with childrearing. Number of children for whom the parent has responsibilities was considered our index of role-overload; the assumption being that as the number of children in the household increases more demands are placed on the single parent.

Income satisfaction represented the inverse of the measure of income stress. The index of income satisfaction was derived from several items used by Pearlin and Johnson (5). This measure of income satisfaction intends to identify the difficulties in acquiring basic necessities of life such as food, medical care, clothing,

housing and savings. The five questions are answered with either of four alternatives phrased in terms of frequency. An alpha of .81 was obtained in this scale. Thirty seven per cent of the respondents reported low income satisfaction or high income stress, whereas 36.0% perceived themselves with medium income satisfaction. In addition, 26.6% were identified to be in the high income satisfied group or low income stress.

FINDINGS

Puerto Rican divorced women are a relative young group of the general population: the median age of the women is 31 years whereas that of their ex-husbands is 35 years. Although the mean educational attainment for the general Puerto Rican population is 8.0 years of school, 77% of the women in this study completed 10 or more years of formal schooling. A large percentage of divorced women (51.2%) are also working. In comparison to their ex-husbands, divorced women occupy slightly higher positions in the work structure. However, even with the favorable circumstances in the work structure, a high percentage (69.9%) of the women reported that their economic situation was more difficult after divorce. In addition, the majority of the Puerto Rican divorced women live in the urban areas (65.5%), are heads of household (73%), and have from 1 to 3 children (80%).

When examining the marriage and divorce experiences, fifty four percent of the women stated that they were married less than eight years at the time of divorce. Interestingly, a large percentage

(43%) of the women thought of getting a divorce as soon as the third year of marriage. Contrary to expectations, 12% of the women did not have any separation before divorce and 58.4% were separated from one month to a year.

As expected, the three legal reasons for divorce most frequently given in court are somewhat different from what the women report as the real reasons for divorce: 34% of the women report adultery, 9.9% alcoholism, and 9.2% maltreatment as the real reasons for divorce. Yet, mutual consent (49.5%), separation (29.7%), and maltreatment (18.8%) are reported as the legal reasons for divorce.

Almost half of the divorced women interviewed do not miss the ex-husband in the childrearing process, whereas only 19.8% do report missing them a lot. However, 35.8% of the women have help from their parents in taking care of the children.

Furthermore, two-thirds of the women reported gaining something from divorce: liberty (30.5%) and tranquility (26.7%). Only 28% reported gaining no advantages from the divorce experience as shown on Table 2. The majority of the women reported the economic loss; and support for home and children as the worst disadvantages of being divorced. Only 25% of the women feel bad with the divorce experience. Most of the women want to forget the past; they feel free, relieved, and like a new person.

Seemingly the divorce experience for the women was a positive learning experience. Most women learned to solve problems (23.2%), and to feel more at ease (12.3%); they feel they have matured (20.8%)

and are more free (8.9%) following the divorce experience. Surprisingly most (75.8%) of the women would divorce again if they found themselves in the same situation. However, most of them (77.5%) report that they would want to marry again.

As expected, in what is supposedly a Catholic society, Table 3 shows that the majority of divorced women report that they are Catholic (72.4%). Although only 1.9% of the divorced women reported that their mothers did not have any religion, the percentage among respondents stating no religion was substantially higher. In church attendance divorced women also differ from their mothers: although 10.5% of the mothers go to church daily, only 2.1% of the respondents go to church that frequently.

In the remainder of this section we are in search of understanding how the stresses, as well as income satisfaction are related to psychological well-being.

Table 4 shows that younger women and women with higher educational status report to be in better psychological well-being than those with less education and older. Furthermore, employed women also describe a better psychological well-being than unemployed respondents.

As expected, more women with low house stress report to be in better psychological well being (71.3%) than those women with high house stress (5.3%), as depicted in Table 5. It is worth noting that more women who inform high and medium income satisfaction claim to

have higher well-being (75.8%) than women with low income satisfaction (24.2%). Also, more women with lower occupational stress and less role overload report higher psychological well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

In our study, the contemporary Puerto Rican divorced women present a different picture from the pre-industrial women as depicted by these earlier studies. They are young, have completed more years of education than their ex-husbands, and have surpassed the mean educational attainment for the general population. The fact that 49% of the women are participating in the labor force and that they occupy higher positions in the work structure than their ex-husbands is also contrary to findings of earlier studies, which depict Puerto Rican women as dependent on men, submissive, and without any resources.

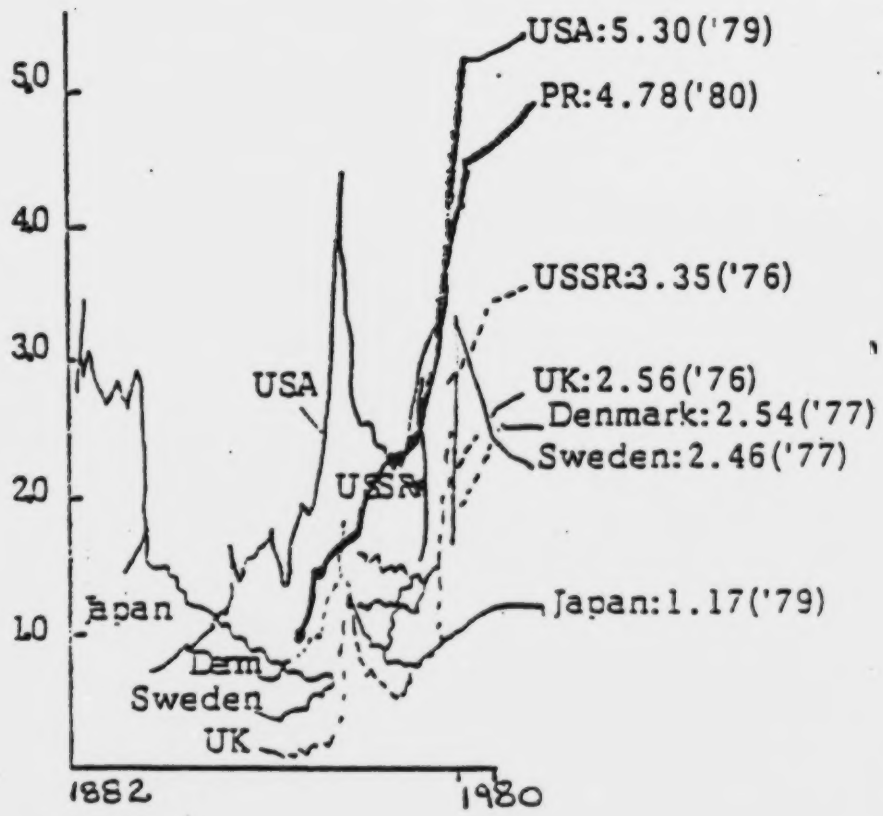
As in other developed countries, Puerto Rico's rate of divorce has increased substantially since the process of industrialization began. Although it has been claimed that divorce is a negative experience, our findings seem to support the contrary. Apparently the circumstances during marriage are such, than even under the stresses, and changes that divorce entails three forth of the women still consider that they would repeat the experience under the same circumstances. In addition, our data tend to present how a higher educational status and employment appear to be associated with better psychological well-being. Researchers in the United States claim that the high rate of divorce can be directly related to the women's work status (10) and that marriages are more likely to break when

wives are employed (11). So it seems to be the case that variables that may be associated with marital disruption also serve as resources to maintain a better psychological well-being when confronted with the stresses of divorce.

Finally, the results presented today appear to support that high levels of house stress, job stress, and role overload seem to be associated with lower levels of psychological well-being in the divorced women. By contrast, the greater the income satisfaction reported by the divorcee, the more enhanced her psychological well-being. These corroborates the findings that persistent effects of such strains can have deleterious psychological effects if experienced over time. So, it is of utmost importance for women to be cognizant that some of her personal resources such as better education, employment, and less number of children will help them to maintain their psychological well-being even when undergoing a stressful live event like divorce.

FIGURE I

DIVORCE RATES IN THE WORLD



Sources: United Nations, Demographic Yearbook, Vol. 30, 1978.
Vital Statistics of the USA, 1980
Vital Statistics of Japan, Vol. 1, 1980.
Vital Statistics of P.R., 1980.

TABLE 1

DIVORCE RATES IN PUERTO RICO

Year	Divorces for Every 1,000 legal marriages for persons ages 15 years old and over	Number of Divorces for every 100 marriages
1940	11.8	13.4
1950	12.9	17.5
1970	21.3	32.8
1980	24.3	46.1

Source: Department of Health of Puerto Rico
Annual Report of Vital Statistics,
1980, Table 1

TABLE 2

FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF THE RESPONDENTS PERCEIVED DISADVANTAGES OF BEING A DIVORCED WOMAN

Disadvantages Perceived	Number of Cases	%
No man at home	19	6.5
Fame of being easy	51	17.4
No one to share	26	8.9
Lose of economic-emotional support	43	14.7
All responsibility of home	59	20.1
Responsability of children	62	21.1
Other	9	3.1
None	24	8.2
		100.0

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RECENTLY DIVORCED WOMEN AND THEIR PARENT'S RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Variable	Respondent %	Father %	Mother %
Religious Preference			
Catholic	72.4	75.7	77.0
Protestant	14.3	12.5	17.4
Other	4.8	2.3	3.7
None	8.5	9.5	1.9
Church Attendance			
Daily	2.1	6.6	10.5
Weekly	30.5	24.4	43.9
Monthly	15.6	7.1	9.7
More than monthly	27.8	18.8	15.2
Never	24.0	43.1	20.7

TABLE 4

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES BY PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
IN RECENTLY DIVORCED PUERTO RICAN WOMEN (N = 293)

Sociodemographic Variables	Psychological Well-Being		
	Low %	Average %	High %
Age (years)*			
16-24	17.2	20.3	19.3
25-34	40.6	46.8	54.0
35-44	18.8	25.3	16.0
44 >	23.4	7.6	10.7
Employment Status**			
Employed	26.6	39.2	49.3
Unemployed	73.4	60.8	50.7
Education*			
0-6 grade	20.3	10.1	8.7
7-9 grade	14.1	13.9	7.3
10-12 grade	35.9	41.8	40.0
>12 grade	29.7	34.2	44.0

*P < .10
**P < .01

TABLE 5

STRESSORS BY PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Stressors	Psychological Well-Being: Low %	Average %	High %
House Stress*			
Low	54.7	57.0	71.3
Medium	28.1	26.6	23.3
High	17.2	16.5	5.3
Occupational Stress**			
Low	26.1	51.1	57.0
Medium	43.5	43.2	38.4
High	30.4	5.4	4.7
Income Satisfaction**			
Low	58.1	46.2	24.2
Medium	30.6	30.8	40.9
High	11.3	23.1	34.9
Role Overload (Total Number of Children)***			
None	9.4	10.1	8.0
1	20.3	24.1	34.7
2	28.1	26.6	29.3
3	20.3	29.1	20.7
4 or more	21.9	10.1	7.3

*P < .01
**P < .001
***P < .10

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